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Summary

King Vortigern's fortress in Snowdon kept tumbling each night after expert masons had worked on it. His wizards advised him to find a youth that never had a father and sprinkle his blood on the foundations. After looking throughout Britain Vortigern's men found such a youth in Wales, Merlin. In Vortigern's court Merlin's mother testified that Merlin's father had been a spirit, an incubus. In the face of imminent death Merlin appeared unafraid. He told the king that an underground lake prevented the fortress from standing. When he had given directions for the draining of the lake Merlin prophesied that two dragons lay asleep on the bottom, a red one and a white one. The dragons were duly found, and they awoke and began fighting. The red dragon won. Vortigern asked what this meant, and Merlin told him he would soon be defeated and killed. Ambrosius landed the next day and proceeded to conquer Britain.

Merlin retired from public view until King Ambrosius wanted to build a great memorial. Ambrosius sent for the magician, who advised him to obtain the Dance of Giants stones from Ireland. Ambrosius' brother, Uther Pendragon, then defeated the Irish. With Merlin's help the huge stones were taken back to England and set up at Stonehenge. With the memorial completed, Merlin saw a blazing star in the shape of a dragon, an omen foretelling Ambrosius' death, the kingship of Uther Pendragon, and a future king — Uther's son — who would prove to be the greatest sovereign Britain would ever have.

At King Uther's coronation feast he fell in love with Ygraine, the wife of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall. Scandalously he showered her with attention, until Gorlois took Ygraine and his troops back to Cornwall and prepared for war. The heart-stricken Uther called his council, which advised him to call Gorlois back to court. If he refused to come Uther should lay siege to Cornwall, and that is what occurred. Uther trapped Gorlois in the castle Dimilioc, whereas Ygraine was at Tintagel, an impregnable castle. The king finally turned to Merlin for help. By magic Merlin turned Uther into the likeness of Gorlois. He also changed himself and another into likenesses of Gorlois' comrades. By this strategem they gained access to Tintagel, where Uther slept with Ygraine, who conceived Arthur that night. The next morning news arrived that Gorlois had been slain in battle the previous day. Uther confessed to the imposture and married Ygraine shortly thereafter.

Uther had promised Merlin that he might have the infant born to Ygraine. So when Arthur was born he was handed over to Merlin, who placed him with the knight Sir Ector. Merlin tutored the boy, and at the age of fifteen Arthur became the king of Britain. King Uther had left no other male heirs. Arthur took Merlin as his adviser, aide, and soothsayer, and the wizard foretold much that would happen to Arthur.

In his old age Merlin fell hopelessly in love with a young woman, Vivian, to whom he taught all the secrets of magic in return for her love. After learning his magical arts the thankless girl cast a spell on him that left Merlin imprisoned in a tower or a cave. Merlin will awaken, however, when King Arthur rises again to lead Britain through a period of her greatest peril.

Arthur was reared by Sir Ector, whom he believed to be his natural father. King Uther had died in the meantime and for years Britain was torn by feuds over the kingship. Bishop Brice prayed one Christmas for a means by which a king might be chosen. Immediately a sword stuck in an anvil placed in a stone block appeared in the churchyard. An inscription read that the person to pull the sword loose would be king. So all the nobles tried and failed.

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Sir Ector brought his son, Sir Kay, and his foster son, Arthur, to the London festivities. Sir Kay had left his sword at home and sent his squire, Arthur, to fetch it. Finding the place locked, Arthur remembered the sword in the churchyard and went to get it. He pulled it from the anvil easily and presented it to Sir Kay, who recognized it and claimed to be the new king. However, Sir Ector forced his son to confess that Arthur had given him the sword. After Arthur had replaced the sword in the anvil it was conclusively proved that only he could remove it. The commoners and many nobles accepted Arthur as king, and he was duly crowned. He generously made Sir Kay his steward.

Yet a number of nobles refused to accept this fifteen-year-old as their rightful king. So Arthur had to fight to establish his kingship. Arthur set up a court at Caerleon and one at Camelot. Six hostile leaders laid siege to Caerleon, but Arthur and his troops drove them off. But these enemy kings were joined by five more kings, and together they raised an army of sixty thousand. Arthur sent to Brittany and Gaul for support, which helped reduce the odds against him. The two armies met at Rockingham, where Merlin caused the enemy tents to collapse at night, which allowed the Arthurian forces to rush in and attack. The next day the fighting was ferocious, but Arthur managed to win the battle through superior strategy and bravery. Once the eleven kings had been routed Arthur turned his attention to the Saxons that had been invading Britain for years. Again, Arthur received aid from Brittany and met the Saxons at Mount Badon, where he and his troops were greatly outnumbered once more. Splendidly armored, Arthur charged the Saxons after a prayer to the Virgin Mary. He created havoc among the coarse barbarians, and victory was his again.

Having secured his kingdom, Arthur undertook expeditions against the Scots, Picts, Irish, Icelanders, Norwegians, and the Gauls. All of these campaigns were victorious. He thereby became the chief king of Christendom, while foreign courts imitated the styles at Camelot. Only once during the rest of Arthur's reign did a foreign power — Rome — try to exact tribute from him, but Rome paid dearly for such presumption.

In the meanwhile Arthur was attracting many noblemen as knights to his court. Among these was Gawain, who came with his mother, Morgause. Although Morgause was married to King Lot, one of Arthur's enemies, she fell in love with the young king and conceived a child by him. Unwittingly Arthur had slept with his own half sister, the daughter of Ygraine and Gorlois. From this incestuous and adulterous union came Modred, the evil knight that would destroy Arthur and his court. Arthur learned the secret of his true parentage after that amorous encounter.

Arthur acquired his famous sword, Excalibur, in this way. He saved Merlin from three murderous rogues, and Merlin accompanied him to the wood where King Pellinore, a knight, was challenging all passersby. While Arthur was a brave, capable fighter, he was overmatched by King Pellinore, who was mighty and experienced in single combat. Arthur's sword broke and he was badly wounded. Pellinore knocked Arthur unconscious while wrestling and was about to slay him when Merlin cast a spell that put Pellinore to sleep. Arthur awoke and Merlin took him to a hermit who healed his wounds. Then Merlin and Arthur rode to a lake, in the middle of which was a hand clasping an upraised sword. A maiden in a small boat appeared and told Arthur that he could have the sword if he would grant her a request later. Arthur agreed, got into the boat and fetched the sword, Excalibur, which was encased in a jeweled scabbard. Thus Arthur obtained his fabulous sword from the Lady of the Lake. But as Merlin pointed out, the scabbard was more valuable, since while Arthur wore it his wounds would not bleed. On returning to his court, Arthur found that his knights respected him even more for undertaking an adventure like an ordinary knight.

Arthur won his wife, Guinevere, in another risky undertaking. Riding with Merlin and a company of knights to Carmalide, Arthur found King Laodegan besieged by the Irish. The Irish forces assaulted the city and Arthur and his men attacked them, fighting far superior numbers. Arthur himself was captured but Merlin saved him. And the Irish were routed when Laodegan's troops joined Arthur's. To reward Arthur, King Laodegan promised him anything he wanted, and since Arthur had fallen in love with his daughter Guinevere, he asked for her hand in marriage. Laodegan not only gave Arthur Guinevere but also a huge oak table of circular shape at which two hundred and fifty knights might be seated. This was the famous Round Table, which was taken to Camelot and became the center of Logres.

Logres was the Arthurian realm of virtue. Any knight who wished to join Arthur's court had to take a vow of virtue. In addition to having courage and might, the chivalric code of Logres required that a knight act honorably, protect the helpless and behave justly to all. Thus Logres was the spiritual counterpart of Arthur's material kingdom, Britain. It generated enough goodness and bravery to see Arthur and his knights through innumerable times of peril. Britain and Logres were only vulnerable from within, through dissent and treachery in Arthur's court. No external force alone could crush

Camelot.

Arthur's most vicious enemy was his half sister, Morgan le Fay. A skilled enchantress, she did everything she could to defeat Arthur. Once Arthur was hunting in Wales with two other knights, Sir Urience and Sir Accolon. They chased a deer until their horses died of exhaustion and the deer fell dead by a large body of water. Extremely tired, the three men saw a ship sail toward them. They embarked and were served by lovely maidens. Soon each fell asleep very deeply. When Arthur awoke he was in a dungeon with other knights. To free the knights he had to fight with a strange knight. When Sir Accolon awoke he was very close to a deep well, and a dwarf told him he must fight a strange knight and gave Sir Accolon Arthur's magic sword and scabbard. Of course this was all the work of Morgan le Fay, who wished to see Arthur slain. The two companions met, fully armed, and Arthur was brutally wounded before he managed to get his own sword back. Neither man would yield even though it meant death. As Arthur was about to kill Accolon he learned he was fighting his own friend and that Morgan le Fay had enchanted each of them. The other hunting companion was Sir Urience, the husband of the sorceress, who awoke in his bed at Camelot beside his wife. In an evil fit Morgan le Fay tried to murder her husband, but a gallant knight prevented her. Fearful that Arthur would take revenge, she stole forth to meet him, and as he lay sleeping she took his scabbard which had rendered him invulnerable. After that she could never return to Camelot. But as a parting gift she sent Arthur a beautiful robe. Suspicious, Arthur had the maiden who brought it try it on first and the maiden was consumed by fire.

One of the bravest, noblest, and strongest of Arthur's knights was Sir Gawain, but he also had a rash temper. While on his first quest he accidentally killed a lady who was begging for the life of her churlish lover. He did it in pique after the man had pleaded for mercy, and the dishonor affected Gawain deeply. To redeem himself he undertook a dangerous adventure.

A gigantic, awful looking knight, completely green and on a green horse, rode into Camelot brandishing a huge axe. He challenged everyone to strike him a blow with the axe, but whoever did so must take a blow from him a year and a day later in a remote part of Wales at the Green Chapel. Besides Arthur only Gawain was brave enough to accept the challenge. Gawain took the axe and cut off the Green Knight's head at one stroke, whereupon the Green Knight reached over, picked up his head by the green hair, and rode off after reminding Gawain to meet him in a year.

The time came for Gawain to set forth in search of the Green Knight. Knowing that death awaited him, he still intended to fulfill his promise. Gawain asked everywhere for the Green Chapel, to no avail, and journeyed through a forest full of brigands. A week before he was due he came to a castle where he was warmly received by the host and hostess. After staying four days he told the host of his quest and learned that the Green Chapel was but two hours away. The host, a tall, swarthy man, invited Gawain to remain three more days to rest from the hardships of his travels. The host also proposed a game. Gawain would give the host whatever he received in the castle in return for what the host brought back from hunting. Gawain agreed to this.

The next morning the beautiful hostess came to his bed and tried to seduce him, but Gawain merely accepted a kiss from her. When her husband returned with several deer Gawain kissed him to fulfill the bargain. The following day the wife again attempted to seduce Gawain, but he just took two kisses, which he gave to the host returning with a boar's head. On the last day the wife tried every blandishment. Then, seeing she had failed, the wife gave Gawain three kisses and a piece of green lace from her girdle that she said would save his life. However, she told him not to tell her husband. And when the host came home Gawain gave him three kisses for a fox skin.

At last the time had come for Gawain to meet the Green Knight, so he took leave of the host and hostess and rode to the Green Chapel, where he expected to die. There was the terrible Green Knight sharpening his axe for the kill. Gawain submitted, but he flinched as the Green Knight swung at him, for which he was sternly reprimanded. The Green Knight again attempted to cut off Gawain's head, yet he held off at the last instant. On his third try the Green Knight nicked Gawain in the neck, which brought forth blood. At this Gawain sprang up and challenged his adversary, but the Green Knight grew mild and told Gawain of all that had happened with the hostess, including Gawain's taking the green lace to save his own life. Gawain felt he himself should die for such cowardice, and he recognized the Green Knight as his host. Yet the Green Knight hailed Gawain as the bravest knight alive. The Lady of the Lake had cast a spell on the Green Knight to test the value of King Arthur's realm of Logres.

The best knight of Logres was Launcelot of the Lake, who was invincible in combat. Educated by the Lady of the Lake in her underwater castle, Launcelot arrived at the court of King Arthur when he was eighteen. The king and queen immediately recognized him as the peerless knight of whom Merlin had spoken. Launcelot and

Guinevere fell instantly in love with each other, and while that love would stir Launcelot to deeds of supreme prowess, it also would result in the downfall of Logres.

Sir Launcelot rode forth to seek adventures with Sir Lionel, but sleepiness overtook him and he dozed off under a tree. Lionel saw a huge knight defeat three other knights. Thinking to win glory he challenged the victor, was beaten in combat, and thrown into a dungeon with other knights. Four queens passed Launcelot as he slept, one of whom was Morgan le Fay. The queens kidnaped the sleeping hero, taking him to a castle where they told him he must choose one of them as a lover or languish in prison. Faithful to Guinevere, Launcelot chose prison, but he was rescued by a young lady who asked him to aid her father in a tournament. Launcelot agreed to help and roundly vanquished her father's opponents. Then he went looking for the huge knight who had taken Sir Lionel prisoner. He challenged the mighty knight and after a fierce contest he slew him, and sent a companion to release Lionel and other knights of Arthur's from their cell. During the night he rescued Sir Kay from three attackers, forcing them to yield to Sir Kay. A lady asked him to rescue a falcon that had become entangled in a tree, and while Launcelot was defenseless in the tree the lady's husband rode up and tried to kill him. However, Launcelot slew the coward with a tree limb. Finally, on this first quest, Launcelot wore Sir Kay's armor home to Camelot and was assaulted by four of Arthur's knights, whom he defeated. When he reached Camelot everyone was hailing him as the greatest knight in the kingdom because of his fine deeds.

Sir Meleagans wished to have Queen Guinevere for himself, and with eighty men he took her and several knights prisoner during a picnic. She sent word to Launcelot to rescue her from Meleagans, but Meleagans arranged an ambush for the knight that left him horseless. After riding in a wood cart, being ridiculed by friends and strangers, being tempted sexually, assaulted by ruffians, magically imprisoned, and set upon by savage beasts, Launcelot arrived at Meleagans' castle. He challenged the lustful knight even though he was weak and exhausted from his many trials. Sir Meleagans might have won the fight if Queen Guinevere had not insulted Launcelot about being unfit to serve her. The remark so angered Launcelot that he killed Meleagans on the spot and restored Guinevere's faith in him.

For many years the love between Launcelot and Guinevere was noble and chaste, but Launcelot was tricked into sin by an enchantment. After rescuing the Dolorous Lady from an evil spell and killing a monstrous dragon, Launcelot came to the Waste Lands and the castle of Carbonek, where King Pelles reigned. Years earlier Sir Balyn, one of Arthur's knights, had come to Carbonek and wounded Pelles with a mystic sword, and Pelles had never healed. A curse had fallen on the land as well, and only the holiest of Arthur's knights could remove the curse, heal King Pelles, or gain the Holy Grail. Launcelot was shown the Grail procession in which three maidens carried the sacred relics of Christ's Passion — the Grail, the platter, and the spear.

In any case, King Pelles had a daughter Elaine, and she fell in love with Launcelot, who was pledged to Guinevere. Despairing of winning his love, Elaine went to a sorceress who changed her appearance to that of Guinevere. In this guise Elaine seduced Launcelot and conceived a child by him. When Launcelot learned of the deception, the blot on his honor was so great that he went mad and became a hermit. King Arthur sent many knights out in search of him when he failed to come back, and Guinevere spent a fabulous sum on the search. Sir Bors rode to Carbonek, where he found Elaine with Sir Launcelot's infant son, Galahad. She told him of all that had happened, and the search continued.

A few years passed and a hermit came again to Elaine's home. It was the mad Launcelot, haggard and exhausted. The holy hermit Naciens took the sleeping knight to a chapel and prayed for him while Sir Bors and Sir Percivale watched and prayed. The Grail magically appeared and disappeared over the altar, and when Launcelot awoke he was sane. However, he needed Elaine's nursing to recover from his hardships as a hermit, yet when he was well he parted from Elaine without giving her a second thought. Later a black barge was found floating down the river to Camelot, and in it was the dead Elaine. She had died for Launcelot's love and was honorably buried. Her son Galahad was reared by monks, and he became the holy knight who would achieve the Sacred Grail for Logres.

One Easter a young man named Geraint came to Arthur's court and announced that he had seen a handsome white stag with golden horns. King Arthur decided to hunt the stag, have Guinevere take Geraint along as a squire, and present Geraint with the stag's head as a trophy for his lady. On the hunt Guinevere saw a gigantic knight accompanied by a lady and a dwarf, so she sent her maid to learn who the strange knight was. The dwarf struck the maid across the face with his whip, and insolently struck Geraint as well when he came to learn the knight's identity. Geraint thought of killing the dwarf but decided against it, since the huge knight was so close. Geraint instead chose to wait until he obtained armor, a spear, and a sword before attacking the knight. Guinevere

promised him a knightship at the Round Table if he succeeded.

The young man followed the monstrous knight, lady, and dwarf to a forbidding castle in an unfriendly town. Geraint found only one friendly person in the town, an old man who took him home and introduced him to his wife and his lovely daughter Enid. The old man was formerly the lord of the castle but the knight had usurped it. Geraint said he would fight the knight, and the old man offered him his rusty armor, spear, and shield to fight Yder, the huge knight, on the next day when Yder held his annual tournament. The prize was a silver sparrow hawk to be given to the victor's lady. Since Geraint had no lady, he chose Enid to ride with him. After a hard fight Geraint made Yder yield, so Geraint sent him to Arthur's court to beg Guinevere's pardon for the dwarf's insults. But when Enid learned that Geraint intended to seek further adventure instead of wedding her promptly, she hurt Geraint to the quick with a bitter remark. Angry, Geraint told her to ride in front of him and keep silent.

Enid heard three thieves about to attack them both, but Geraint warned her to keep quiet and killed the thieves, driving them on their horses before him. Then six robbers assaulted Geraint and again he killed them, adding to his spoils. A third time nine brigands attacked, with Geraint warning Enid to remain silent and then killing the nine thieves. The hero now had eighteen suits of armor tied to eighteen horses in a pack before him and Enid. They came to the castle of Sir Oringle, where Geraint still sulked because of Enid's insult. Oringle became enamored of Enid and threatened to kill Geraint on the spot, but Enid said secretly that she would surrender herself on the next day as they rode away. Starting on their journey Enid warned Geraint of their danger, and soon they were accosted by Oringle and a host of knights. Geraint killed many of them, but they overpowered him and rendered him practically dead. Oringle took Enid back to his castle, where she refused to eat or drink until Geraint did so too, for Geraint lay lifeless in the hall. Enraged by her obstinacy, Oringle struck Enid, and her scream brought Geraint out of his coma to cut off Oringle's head. Thinking Geraint a ghost, the others fled from the hall, which allowed Geraint and Enid to escape.

At length the two of them came in sight of King Arthur's hunting party. Sir Kay thought to challenge the strange knight, but Geraint knocked him from his horse. King Arthur and Guinevere hailed Geraint, presenting him with the stag's head, which Geraint gave to Enid. When all of his exploits became known Geraint was duly made a knight of the Round Table.

Born of sorrow by a dying woman, Tristram of Lyonesse was raised by foster parents but learned the gentlemanly arts of hunting, minstrelsy, riding, fighting, and languages. Temporarily kidnaped by sailors, he arrived at the court of King Mark of Cornwall, where he distinguished himself in every way. When Marhault of Ireland demanded tribute of King Mark, Tristram challenged the mighty knight. In the fight Marhault received fatal wounds, but he sailed back to Ireland to die. Tristram himself was badly wounded and would not heal, so he sailed off to find a physician. A storm took him to Ireland, where he assumed a false name and went to the Irish court as a minstrel. In return for teaching her daughter, Iseult the Fair, to play the harp Queen Isaud healed Tristram of his wounds.

Back in Cornwall, Tristram told King Mark of the beautiful Iseult, and the king decided to make her his queen. King Mark sent Tristram to Ireland to fetch her. To redeem himself with the Irish for killing Marhault, Tristram slew a dragon that was devastating the land, but another man claimed the credit when Tristram passed out from the dragon's poison. However, it was proved that Tristram had done it, and Queen Isaud forgave him for the death of Marhault. After defeating a knight in combat Tristram was allowed to take Iseult to Cornwall to marry King Mark. And on the voyage Tristram and Iseult unwittingly drank a love potion that caused them to fall deeply and permanently in love.

Yet Iseult was pledged to King Mark, and out of honor she married him. However, she and Tristram held secret meetings together, and a jealous courtier exposed them both to King Mark, who tried to kill Tristram. Instead, Tristram was banished from Cornwall, but he and Iseult still managed to communicate by various means and to hold infrequent rendezvous. Tristram became famous for his knightly services at King Arthur's court, defeating every opponent but Launcelot. He was awarded a seat at the Round Table, but despite his fine exploits he grieved for Iseult's love.

As a consolation he married another woman named Iseult — Iseult of the White Hands. Tristram behaved nobly toward his wife but could not forget his one true love. In trying to save his brother-in-law, Tristram was wounded by a poisoned spear, and he knew that only Iseult the Fair could heal him. He sent a man by ship to bring her, and if she came the sail was to be white, but otherwise a black sail would be hoisted. Too weak to look out the window, Tristram asked his wife to tell him the color of the sail on the approaching ship. It was white, but in a fit of bitter jealousy she told him it was black, and Tristram died. Heartsick at her lover's death, Iseult the Fair also died. Their bodies

and Tristram died. Heartsick at her lover's death, Iseult the Fair also died. Their bodies were taken to King Mark, who forgave them and allowed them to be buried in his own chapel. A vine grew out of Tristram's grave into Iseult's and could not be stopped.

After King Pellinore and two of his sons had been slain, his wife took the only remaining son into the seclusion of a deep forest. There Percivale grew up wild, becoming an expert with the dart. When he was fifteen he saw five knights who told him of King Arthur's realm of Logres. Percivale took leave of his mother and rode to Caerleon. As he left the forest he came upon a silken tent in which he found a sleeping maiden. He exchanged rings with her and kissed her mouth as she slept. Then he continued to Caerleon, where Arthur held court.

Upon entering Arthur's hall he found a huge knight in golden armor. The knight rudely took Arthur's drinking cup from the king, drained it, and rode off with it. Arthur said he wanted some lowly fellow to retrieve the cup and avenge the insult. Percivale offered his services, at which Sir Kay took umbrage. And when a maiden addressed the young bumpkin as the finest knight in the realm Sir Kay struck her in the face, for which Percivale vowed revenge. Percivale followed the Red Knight into the country and there he challenged the thief, who attacked. Dodging the thrust of the lance, Percivale killed him as he charged again. Having trouble stripping the Red Knight of his golden armor, Percivale was assisted by Sir Gonemans, an old knight who offered to teach him the arts and code of chivalry.

Percivale spent the summer with Sir Gonemans and then went in search of adventure. He came to the Waste Lands and found the castle of Carbonek, which seemed desolate and empty. He entered and played chess three times on a magic chessboard. He lost each time and drew his sword to hack the mysterious chess pieces to bits, but a maiden rushed up and warned him not to. It was Blanchefleur, the same girl he had kissed in the silken tent. They both confessed their undying love for, each other. A clap of thunder filled the castle and three maidens bearing the holy relics of Christ's Passion appeared and then vanished, and Percivale was filled with a sublime peace. Blanchefleur told of the Grail Quest approaching, but Percivale in his enthusiasm for such a quest madly rushed off into the forest, only to find that Carbonez and his true love had disappeared. Sadly he searched for them but he was not destined to find them until the completion of the Grail Quest.

As he rode to Caerleon, Percivale fell rapt in revery. King Arthur and three knights saw the strange knight, and Arthur sent Sir Kay to find out who it was. Percivale did not answer Sir Kay, so Kay struck him with an iron gauntlet, which roused Percivale to fury. Sir Kay was badly wounded in combat and was thereby repaid for his extreme rudeness. Arthur revealed himself, accepted the goblet that the Red Knight had stolen, and then knighted Percivale, telling him that Merlin had foretold his coming. Percivale would arrive at Arthur's court just before the Grail Quest would begin.

The culmination of Arthur's reign and of Logres was the Quest for the Holy Grail, the cup that Christ had used at the Last Supper. Gawain brought back news to Camelot that Merlin had said that every knight must embark on the Grail Quest. A sword in a stone, reserved for a holy knight, was found floating on the river by Camelot. At Pentecost Sir Launcelot made his long-lost son, Galahad, a knight. And the holy hermit, Naciens, introduced Galahad to Arthur's court, where Galahad took his place in the Siege Perilous, a seat that only a saintly knight could occupy. Galahad alone was able to withdraw the sword from the stone, and with it he defeated several knights in tournament. At the Feast of Pentecost every place at the Round Table was occupied at last, and the Grail appeared and vanished in a wondrous way. Gawain vowed to seek the Grail, and every other knight did the same. Arthur was grieved to think that this would be the last time all his knights would gather, for many would die on the Quest. And when the Quest was over, Arthur knew, the end of Logres was near.

Sir Galahad won a shield from a nameless White Knight, a white shield with a cross of blood upon it. He also won a blessing from a hermit knight. Others who had tried to gain them were sorely hurt. At length Galahad was taken aboard the Enchanted Ship that had brought Joseph of Arimathea to England. Sir Percivale had to overcome three manifestations of the devil before he could enter the Enchanted Ship; first as an unruly black stallion that nearly carried him off, then as a serpent that was strangling a lion, and finally as a lovely seductress. He was saved only by calling on the power of Heaven. Sir Bors de Gannis was allowed upon the Enchanted Ship as well after rescuing a lady from a rapist, resisting the lady's seductions, and submitting to the cruelty of his maddened elder brother. Last, Sir Launcelot came aboard the Enchanted Ship once he had confessed his sinful love for Queen Guinevere and done penance for it. Each of these knights was led aboard the Enchanted Ship by Dindrane, the sister of Percivale and a nun.

The Enchanted Ship sailed along and put into a bay, where the four knights and the nun disembarked. Outside a castle they were attacked by a company of knights, but they

defended themselves well. Then a Golden Knight rode up, the lord of the castle, and he called off his men. The Golden Knight had an ailing wife who could only be healed by a virgin's blood. Many maidens had died in giving impure blood, but Dindrane offered her own blood, which healed the lady but caused Dindrane to die. The castle itself was then burnt to charred ruins because of the evil that had been done there. Sir Bors rode on with Sir Galahad toward the Waste Lands, while Sir Percivale and Sir Launcelot pursued further adventures.

Sir Gawain met Sir Ector while riding in the Waste Lands and they exchanged gossip about what others had done on the Quest. The two came to a deserted chapel. That night a mysterious voice warned Sir Ector to quit the Quest, which he did. Sir Gawain, however, saw a mysterious candlestick lighted and extinguished. In the morning Naciens the hermit told him that he had the power to lift the curse from the Waste Lands if he kept himself pure. Gawain rode on and encountered Sir Launcelot, and both of them came to the castle of Carbonek, where they were greeted by King Pelles. A feast of rich food and wine was set before the two knights. Sir Launcelot ate of it and fell asleep, but Sir Gawain ate only bread and water and kept silent despite the taunts of others present. A clap of thunder announced the Grail procession of the three maidens carrying the holy relics. Gawain got up and asked the Grail Maiden what these things meant. He was told to follow, and he did so. Sir Launcelot tried to follow too but was only permitted a glimpse of the Grail, at which he fell in a swoon, whereas Gawain was allowed a full vision of the mystic cup. He had lifted the curse from the Waste Lands, but the full completion of the Grail Quest was for others.

Sir Percivale caught up with Sir Bors and Sir Galahad as they rode to Carbonek. The three knights were greeted by Pelles and Naciens in the castle. They declined the rich fare, eating merely bread and water. Again at the peal of thunder the Grail procession of three maidens appeared, and a sacred ritual took place in which Sir Galahad drank from the Holy Grail, relieved Naciens the monk of the ancient curse that Joseph of Arimathea had laid upon him, and healed King Pelles of the wound that had afflicted him for years. Sir Percivale recognized the Grail Maiden as his true love Blanchefleur, who had vanished. After piecing a mystic sword together, Percivale married Blanchefleur under Galahad's supervision, and he became King of Carbonek when Pelles died. His mission accomplished, Sir Galahad was transfigured before the court, and he died. Sir Bors rode back to Camelot to tell of the completion of the Grail Quest and of the hour in which the glory of Logres was fulfilled.

Several seats at the Round Table now were empty, and Arthur knew that Logres would soon succumb to the forces of darkness as Merlin had prophesied. Sir Launcelot was the ablest knight in the kingdom, but he sinned adulterously with Queen Guinevere, and through that sinning he brought about a fatal breach in Arthur's court. Sir Modred was Arthur's bastard son by Morgause, the wife of King Lot. Modred was envious of Arthur's power, so he conspired with Gawain's brother Agravain to cause strife between Arthur and Launcelot. The two conspirators overheard Guinevere invite Launcelot secretly to her room one night. They told King Arthur, who empowered them to take twelve knights and surprise the loving couple together, which they did. Sir Launcelot was defenseless, but he killed an attacker and put on the man's armor. Then he killed Agravain, wounded Modred, and made his escape.

Modred went again to Arthur and told him of all that had transpired. He insisted that Guinevere be put to death as an adulteress. Arthur sadly agreed that this was the law. Guinevere was to be burned at the stake. Arthur tried to get Gawain to attend, but he refused and sent two more of his brothers instead. As the pyre was being lighted Sir Launcelot rode up with a company of knights, killed many of Arthur's men, including Gawain's brothers, and rescued the queen from the fire. They retreated to Launcelot's castle, the Joyous Gard, and Arthur and Gawain laid siege to the place. Whenever Arthur was tempted to make peace with Launcelot, Gawain grew angry, for he was carrying on a blood feud with Launcelot. At last Launcelot in a spirit of generosity saved Arthur's life during a battle, and when he offered to return Guinevere and exile himself from England Arthur made truce with him. So Launcelot went to Armorica in France.

However, Gawain wanted Launcelot's life, so he raised an army and persuaded Arthur to attack Launcelot in France. The Saxons, having learned of the civil war, began invading England once more. And in Arthur's absence Sir Modred announced that Arthur had died in France and persuaded the people to elect himself king, after which he was crowned at Canterbury. Modred tried unsuccessfully to take Guinevere as his queen. On threatening the Archbishop, Modred was excommunicated. When Arthur learned of what was happening in his own realm he withdrew from France to return to Dover, where he and his army were met by Modred's forces. In the fighting Modred and his troops were routed. Gawain, who had received terrible wounds from Launcelot in France, was wounded again fatally at Dover. Yet on his deathbed he wrote Launcelot, begging his forgiveness and urging him to return to Britain to save Arthur's kingdom from Modred.

from Modred.

Within a short time Modred had gathered an army of a hundred thousand men and was harassing western Britain. Arthur took his army to Camlann to meet Modred. The night before the battle Gawain appeared to Arthur in a vision and told him to make a truce with Modred for a month, until Launcelot could come to his aid. So Arthur made a truce with Modred as the two armies confronted one another. Yet when a soldier drew his sword to kill a snake that had stung him the two forces charged one another. By evening both armies were almost completely annihilated. On Arthur's side only Arthur and two knights, both badly hurt, were left alive. Arthur suddenly saw Modred and in a fury the two men assaulted each other. Modred was slain outright, while Arthur was fatally hurt. He told his two remaining knights to carry him to a nearby lake, and one of them died while lifting him. Arthur then told the other to throw his sword Excalibur into the lake. The knight was reluctant to do so, but on Arthur's insistence he did it and a hand reached out of the lake and seized the sword. Then a barge came sailing up with the Lady of the Lake, the Lady of Avalon, and Morgan le Fay. They took Arthur aboard and sailed to the Isle of Avalon, where Arthur would rest until Britain would need him again.

Sir Launcelot returned to Britain to find the realm of Logres completely extinguished. Gawain and Arthur were dead, along with every knight of the Round Table but five. Guinevere had become a nun to repent of the sin that had destroyed Logres, and Launcelot followed her example by becoming a monk. When those two died the four knights remaining undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And England was overrun with barbarians.

Analysis

These legends are strongly medieval in flavor. Magic enchantments and miracles abound, yet despite the fantastic elements there is a hard basis of reality underlying these tales. Not a factual reality, but the kind that fiction presents. The world here is coherent: it makes sense. King Arthur is the center of that world, and by his valor, his strength, and his high purpose he collects an assembly of knights who share his purpose. These knights vie with one another to test their courage, might, and nobility. They undergo temptations that they must resist if they are to perform great deeds. Above all, they must be unselfish, for they are serving a power greater than themselves, the ideal of Logres, the holy realm. Logres is a place where faith works miracles and where the power of Heaven supports the weak and the humble. Frequently in these stories a knight fails to live up to this communal ideal, but he must pay for it in the end. Arthur begets Modred on his half sister adulterously, and Modred is the agent of Arthur's ruin. Launcelot and Guinevere destroy Logres with their love affair. And Tristram through his love for King Mark's wife endures exile and death.

There seems to be a general logic to the magic spells and miracles of these tales. Enchantments are used to test the knights of the Round Table. When another person suffers from a spell it takes a knight to redeem that person. When a knight undergoes enchantment it is to test his integrity. To witness a miracle a knight must have passed his tests of character. Thus wonders in these tales are not just the furnishings of an age of faith, for they serve to reveal a man's character.

This is our first example of a band of heroes fighting for abstract principles of justice, honor, and purity. These knights have serious flaws — pride, lust, rashness, vengefulness — but they rise above their faults in the contribution they make to Logres. Each knight is tested for his weaknesses. Only the holiest of knights, Sir Galahad, is allowed to drink from the Holy Grail. The Grail Quest is the summation of Logres, the period when each knight sets forth on an unselfish mission.

These assorted tales carry an extremely important insight — that a man's self-respect does not depend on external qualities, such as wealth, position, physical strength, or size. It depends on his private integrity and his valor in pursuing great goals. This is the kind of insight that builds civilizations.

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